The HMAS Australia mutiny - 1919

A SOLDIER’S PERSPECTIVE

by

Graham Wilson

mutiny - n. 1. revolt, or a revolt or rebellion, against constituted authority; esp. by soldiers or seamen against their officers.  v. 2. to commit the offence of mutiny; revolt against constituted authority.

M utiny is a particularly evocative word, particularly so in the context of the profession of arms. There is hardly a word more likely to send shivers of apprehension up and down the spine of military authority than "mutiny". As can be seen by the above definition, drawn from The Macquarie Concise Dictionary, the standard dictionary of the ADF, the act of mutiny involves "revolt or rebellion" against constituted authority and the definition goes on to be quite specific in tying the act of mutiny into revolt by soldiers and sailors against their officers.

Australia has seen a number of mutinies, including the mutiny of the officers and men of the New South Wales Corps against the governor of New South Wales, William Bligh, in 1813, and the mutiny of a number of battalions of the AIF on the Western Front in 1918 in protest against orders to disband. One Australian mutiny, however, which has faded somewhat into the rumble of history is the mutiny aboard HMAS Australia, which occurred at Fremantle in 1919.

The Australia mutiny was quite notorious at the time of the event and was widely reported, becoming something of a cause celebre, as well as a point of some contention between the Australian and British governments and, especially, the Australian Naval Board and the Admiralty and the Australian Government. Despite being widely reported at the time, however, as stated in the introduction the Australia mutiny is largely forgotten today. Additionally, while the mutiny has been dealt with in a number of works, this treatment seems to have been mainly carried out by civilians and it would appear that it has not really been examined in detail by a professional military person. The aim of this article is to recount the details of the Australia mutiny of 1919 in order to acquaint readers with this important but largely forgotten event of Australian naval history and also to examine the incident from the point of view of a member of the profession of arms, rather than a lawyer, a bureaucrat or a civilian historian.

Background

When the Royal Australian Navy was formed in 1911 it acquired three things, namely an act governing its administration, command and discipline (the Naval Defence Act 1910); a close link with the Royal Navy; and a flagship, the "Indefatigable" Class battle-cruiser HMAS Australia. Each of these items was to have a causative effect on the Australia mutiny.

The first legislation governing the Australian navy was the Defence Act 1903, an act to "provide for the Naval and Military Defence and Protection of the Commonwealth" (italics mine). Acknowledging the somewhat unwieldy artifice of lumping the Army and the Navy under the one act, the Commonwealth Government passed the Naval Defence Act 1910, which was subsequently replaced by the Naval Defence Act 1911 and the Naval Defence Act 1912. Tellingly, all of the acts stipulated that at all times when on active service, members of the Australian navy were subject to the (Imperial) Naval Discipline Act 1866 and this was to be the case at the time of the 1919 mutiny.

The Royal Navy Link.

From its very conception, RAN was inextricably linked with the RN and was to remain so for almost 50 years with most flag appointments and major ship commands going to officers of the RN during the period. Of even greater import to the incident under discussion was the fact that under Imperial legislation passed in 1911, the Naval Discipline (Dominion Naval Forces) Act 1911 firmly placed the RAN under control of the RN and ensured that the Naval Discipline Act 1866 applied to the RAN. This control and subject to the Naval Discipline Act was confirmed by an (Australian government) amendment to the Naval Defence Act.

All of this ensured that, although in theory the RAN was an independent force, it was in fact merely an extension of the RN. This was further reinforced by an agreement reached at the Imperial Defence Conference of 1911 to the effect that in time of war (or earlier if the Imperial authorities considered it advisable (italics mine)), the ships of the RAN would be transferred to Admiralty control. The Naval Defence Act 1912 specifically conferred on the Governor-General the power
to enact this transfer by Order In Council.

**HMAS Australia.**

The flagship of the Royal Australian Navy, HMAS Australia, had been laid down in 1910, launched in 1911 and commissioned into the Australian Fleet in 1913. A powerful unit, she mounted a main armament of eight 12-inch guns and secondary armament of sixteen 4-inch guns, four 3-pounder guns, five machine guns and two submerged 18-inch torpedo tubes. With a complement of 900, she was rated at 25 knots and had a cruising range of 6,300 miles at best speed (10 knots).

At the outbreak of the First World War, the ships of the Royal Australian Navy, which was also quaintly known as the Australian Squadron of the Royal Navy, were transferred to the RN by an Order In Council signed by the Governor-General. HMAS Australia sailed for the UK at the end of 1914 and she raised the flag of the Admiral Commanding 2nd Battle Cruiser Squadron on 8 February 1915 at Rosyth. She was to spend the war on long arduous patrols in the North Sea, missing the Battle of Jutland due to being in dock for repairs to damage sustained in a collision with another ship of the Squadron, HMS New Zealand, on 22 April 1916.

On 21 November, 1918, Australia was in the van of the port column of the Grand Fleet at the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow. With the end of the war, but with the peace treaty yet to be signed, Australia departed Portsmouth for home on 23 April 1919. By this stage, many of the crew had been away from home for four years and were eagerly looking forward to seeing Australia and their families. Sailing via the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, Australia reached Fremantle on 28 May, 1919, a Wednesday.

**The Mutiny**

Australia dropped anchor in Fremantle harbour in the forenoon of 28 May to take on coal and supplies and conduct a port visit. It was planned to sail for Sydney the following Sunday, 1 June, and the Captain took the opportunity to give the crew liberty over the next four days. The crew were warmly welcomed and generously entertained by the citizens of Perth and Fremantle over the period from Wednesday to Saturday.

From later testimony, it appears that a rumour spread on the Saturday that the sailing of the ship was to be delayed until Monday, 2 June, to allow an open day to be held aboard the ship to give the ship’s company a chance to entertain citizens of Perth and Fremantle in repayment for their hospitality. Whether the existence of this alleged rumour was true or not, the fact is that on the Sunday morning, as the ship was preparing to get under way, a delegation of crewmen, variously estimated as between 80 - 100 strong, many of them “dressed as libertymen”, approached the Officer of the Day on the quarter-deck. The captain, Captain C.L. Cumerlege RN, observed this gathering and directed the Commander to ascertain the reason for it. The Commander was informed through a spokesman that the men requested that the sailing of the ship be delayed for one day so that the ship’s company could have the opportunity to entertain civilian friends aboard.

On being informed of this, the Captain advised the assemblage that it was impossible to accede to their request, which, in his words, amounted to a demand, and ordered them off the quarter-deck. At this, the men “straggled off the quarter-deck” but, as they did so, “a number of ejaculations of an insubordinate nature were... made”. Shortly thereafter, the Commodore Commanding HMA Fleet, Commodore (later Rear Admiral) J.S. Dumarèsq, CB, CVO, RN, having come aboard and the last boat having been hoisted in, the Captain gave the order to let go aft. At that moment, however, he received a telephone call from the engine room advising him that the stoker’s watch had left the boiler room. The Captain had no choice now but to delay the departure of the ship until such time as he could fall in the officers, chief petty officers and petty officers and tell off the necessary duty men for steaming the ship. Having done this, despite the efforts of those members of the ship’s company who had attempted to stop the ship from sailing, Australia slipped from Fremantle and set course for Sydney.

An investigation was immediately launched by the Captain to identify the ringleaders of the mutiny and five men were duly identified and arrested. Seven other men were also arrested but were not identified as ringleaders.

**The Court Martial**

As required by both the Naval Discipline Act 1866 and the Naval Defence Force Act 1912, the Captain Cumerlege requested the convening of a court-martial to try the alleged mutineers via a “Circumstantial Letter”. In this letter, he laid out the facts of the case and requested the convening authority, in this case the Commodore Commanding HMA Fleet (Commodore Dumarèsq), to convene a court martial.

The request by Captain Cumerlege was duly received and acted upon and on the morning of 20 June, 1919, the Union flag was raised at the peak of HMAS Encounter in Sydney harbour and the signal gun was fired to indicate that a court martial was sitting aboard.

The rules governing the convening of a court martial were quite specific and included the following points:

- courts martial must consist of not less than five nor more than nine officers;
- only a flag officer, captain, commander, lieutenant-commander, or lieutenant of the Executive Branch
The court martial convened aboard **Encounter** consisted of the following officers:

- Commodore J.C.T. Glossop, RN, HMAS **Penguin** (President);
- Captain F.H.C. Brownlow, RAN, District Naval Officer, Sydney;
- Captain J.F. Robbins, RAN, HMAS **Encounter**;
- Commander F.H. Brabant, RN, HMAS **Australia**; and
- Commander H.J. Feakes, RAN, HMAS **Tingira**.

Before the Court were five members of the ship’s company of HMAS **Australia** (see end note) who stood accused, under S.11 of the Naval Discipline Act 1866, with “having joined in a mutiny not accompanied by violence”. The full text of the relevant section of the Act is as follows:

> S.11 ‘Where a mutiny is not accompanied by violence, the ringleader or ringleaders of the mutiny shall suffer death, or such other punishment as is hereinafter mentioned; and all other persons who shall join in such mutiny or shall not use their utmost exertions to suppress the same, shall suffer imprisonment or such other punishment as is hereinafter mentioned’.

The essence of the charge against the five men was that (as ringleaders although not accused as such) they had resisted the lawful authority of the captain of HMAS **Australia** in that they had prevented him from taking his ship to sea. Under the Act, as shown above, the maximum penalty for a person found guilty of the charge was imprisonment. On the other hand, the maximum penalty for persons charged as being ringleaders of a mutiny was death. Prior to the court martial, the other seven men earlier arrested had been summarily dealt with by Captain Cumerlege for the lesser offence of not using their utmost exertions to suppress a mutiny. All had been found Guilty and had been awarded 90 days imprisonment.

The court-martial, before which all five accused pleaded Guilty, lasted for one day. During the trial, various pleas in mitigation were entered including:

- testimony as to the rumour of a delay in sailing from Fremantle outlined above,
- the youth of several of the accused,
- the previous good records of all of accused,
- the fact that one of the accused had been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for his part in the raid on Zeebrugge, and
- the extended period the men had been away from home.

Taking into account all of the evidence for and against the accused, as well as pleas of mitigation, the Court eventually reached a verdict of Guilty and awarded the following punishments:

- one Stoker - two years imprisonment with hard labour and dismissal;
- one Stoker - two years imprisonment and dismissal;
- one Able Seaman - 18 months imprisonment and dismissal;
- one Ordinary Seaman - one year's imprisonment; and
- one Ordinary Seaman - one year's imprisonment.

**The Aftermath**

Commodore Dumaresq reported the findings and sentences of the Court to the Naval Board on 25 June, 1919. As far as the navy was concerned, the incident was now closed, justice having both been done and been seen to be done. Unfortunately, many people in Australia, both public and private, did not see the matter in the same light as the navy. From the moment the sentences were handed down, cries arose from all quarters of Australian society, but especially the Opposition Benches of Federal Parliament, that justice had actually not been done. Opposition MPs questioned the government as to the possibility of appeal (R.B. Orchard, MP) and accused the navy of having “brutally and savagely sentenced” the five sailors (Cornelius Orchard, MP). In the Senate, the event from which the court martial sprung was referred to as a “so called mutiny” and here also the sentences were described as “savage”.

From the end of June until October, the case was brought up frequently in Parliament and the Opposition made much political mileage from it. To the embarrassment of the Government, several of their own members joined in the calls for remission and clemency. As the RAN had been under Admiralty control, the findings of the court martial had to be sent to Britain for review. In the fullness of time, 10 September, 1919 in fact, the Admiralty replied to the request for review and agreed with Commodore Dumaresq that the sentences were not excessive. On the other hand, the Admiralty noted the youth of the offenders and advised that sentences should be suspended or remitted by half, with first releases to occur on 20 December, 1919.

This was not good enough for those calling for the release of the five prisoners and now Prime Minister Hughes and Minister for the Navy Cook found themselves under pressure from the families of the convicted mutineers, as well as from Parliament and the Senate. Finally, on 6 November, 1919, the Australian govern-
ment sent a telegram to the Secretary of State for the Colonies requesting "remission before Christmas of men involved" and asking "if Admiralty has any objections". On 13 November, the Secretary of State replied that the Admiralty agreed to the releases as proposed and on 22 November it was announced that all five men would be released on 20 December.

This announcement, the effect of which was that all five mutineers served sentences of six months and thus paid equally for the crime (except that one served his time at hard labour), finally succeeded in taking the heat out of the affair for Parliament. Trouble for the navy, however, continued, though internal now. When he read of the government's request and the Admiralty's decision, Commodore Dumaresq was outraged at what he saw as outside meddling in the affairs of the navy. While he indicated that he was prepared, with very ill-grace, to sign the Release Warrants for the five mutineers, he at first intimated and then outright declared that if the remission went ahead he would resign. His bluff, if such it was, was called by the government which remained firm in its decision to release the mutineers on 20 December and as a consequence Dumaresq submitted his resignation to the Naval Board on 19 December. His superior, Rear Admiral Sir Percy Grant, RN, First Naval Member of the Australian Naval Board, had already tendered his resignation on 14 December.

Grant and Dumaresq's major concern was that outside "meddling" would result in the erosion of discipline in the RAN and that as a result the RN would be unwilling to lend its best officer's to the Australian service due to a conception that these officers would not be fully supported in the prosecution of their duties by the government. Copious communication flowed between Admiral Grant and the Prime Minister and Minister for the Navy throughout December 1919. As a result of this, the Naval Board, with the support of the Prime Minister, issued Navy Order No. 260 of 1919. This rather remarkable document, which was ordered to be displayed on all ship's notice boards and read to all men returning from leave, pointedly advised that the original findings and sentences of the court-martial of the Australia mutineers had been "just and necessary" and that their early release had been due to "clemency extended to all offenders, Naval, Military and Civil, on the very exceptional occasion of the signing of peace". The issue of this order, which some viewed as tantamount to a government apology to the navy, was enough to persuade Grant and Dumaresq to withdraw their resignations on 13 February, 1920.

The navy had one final word, however, with the issue of Navy Order No. 27 of 1920 on 25 February. This order, in the form of a Notice to the Fleet, advised of the government's concern at "acts of insubordination" which had taken place "in several of H.M.A. Ships during the past year" and underlined the need for regulations to be strictly adhered to in order to "permit of all grievances being ventilated through the proper channels" and further advised that the "Government will fully support all just and proper actions taken by the constituted authorities to maintain the discipline of the Fleet".

A Military Perspective

Notorious at the time, the HMAS Australia mutiny and its ensuing court martial very rapidly faded from view. It is perhaps useful to look back now at the affair, and especially the court martial and its aftermath, from the point of view of a professional military man rather than that of a popular historian, a senior bureaucrat or a lawyer.

The finding of the Court, and the sentences awarded were consistent with both the Naval Discipline Act 1866 and the Naval Defence Act 1912. When considering the sentences handed down, it is important to remember that under the latter Act, the RAN had automatically become part of the RN at the outbreak of the First World War and by law remained so until the declaration of peace. The latter event did not occur until the signing of the peace treaty at Versailles on 28 June, 1919, eight days after the court martial was completed.

Mutiny or Not Mutiny?

One question which immediately arises in the military mind is whether or not the mutiny was really a mutiny. Much political mileage was made by the Opposition following the court martial with reference to the "so-called mutiny" and the "trivial nature" of the offence. Further to this, all academic comments on the incident which the author have read appear to agree on the point that it was to a certain degree inappropriate to regard the mutiny on the Australia as in fact a mutiny. There appears to be a consensus among these commentators that because the accused mutineers were Australians then the "so-called mutiny" should actually have been viewed as more of an industrial dispute and treated as such. It is of interest that the mutinies within the AIF on the Western Front in 1918 have been viewed by many, if not most, commentators (including the prolific Dr C.E.W. Bean and the quintessentially Australian Patsy Adam-Smith) in the same light. The logic appears to be that because Australians supposedly came from a "frontier society" where "Jack was as good as his master" and where the rough and ready common man was used to negotiating with his "boss" over wages and conditions and regarded the final resort of withholding labour as sacrosanct and entirely legitimate (which, in a purely civilian industrial context, of course is), then incidents such as the AIF mutinies and the Australia mutiny were totally understandable and should have been treated as what the men regarded them as, i.e. industrial disputes.

Nothing, from my point of view as a professional soldier of almost a quarter of a century's service, could be further from the truth than this facile and smug
supposition. In the exact same way that the members of
the mutinous battalions of the AIF on the Western Front
refused direct orders to disband in September, 1918,
the fact is that the Australia mutineers disobeyed direct
orders and conspired to subvert the authority of the cap-
tain. All of these men were volunteers, all of several
years service, and all of them would have understood
quite clearly both the nature and the content of the rules
and strictures under which they lived. The method
of their approach to the captain of the ship with their re-
quest was totally inappropriate and contrary to both rule
and custom. Having had their request denied, their fur-
ther action in either suborning or coercing other mem-
ers of the ship’s company, namely the stoker’s watch,
to forgo their duty in an attempt to delay the departure
of the ship amounted to exactly what they were eventu-
ally charged with, to wit, mutiny.

Having said that, the question arises as to whether or
not the men involved were aware of the consequences
of their actions. As to whether or not they were actually
aware of the exact consequences, I cannot really com-
ment. I can say, however, that they would have been
fully aware of the fact that they were committing an
offence and that some punishment must accrue from it.
On joining his ship or on the occasion of the first com-
missoning of a ship, every man was read the so called
“Articles of War”, which were basically the offence cre-
ating sections of the Naval Discipline Act 1866. These
Articles, a copy of which was also prominently displayed
in an accessible part of every ship, dealt quite explicitly
with mutiny and disobedience and outlined in detail the
consequences of these offences. Thus, it is unlikely that
any of the accused mutineers would have been unaware
of the illegality of their actions nor of at least probable
consequences.

A final point concerns the severity (or otherwise) of the
sentences. Again, at the time of the court martial, both
the navy and the government were accused of brutality
and savagery in sentencing the mutineers. In the cold
light of reason, and bearing in mind the rules under
which the RAN was then operating, I personally cannot
help but agree with Commodore Dumaresq in his as-
sement that the sentences were quite lenient. All five
men who were court martialed had been identified as
ringleaders of the mutiny and by rights should have been
charged as such under Article S.11 of the Naval Disci-
pline Act 1866, a charge which carried the maximum
penalty of death. For various reasons, the navy chose to
charge the men with the lesser charge of “taking part in
a mutiny”: a charge which carried far lesser penalties.

I hasten to add that I am not personally advocating that
the men should have been charged with the capital of-
fence rather than the lesser one. I believe that the senior
officers involved, for whatever reasons they did so,
showed great leniency and magnanimity in the framing
of the charges and am in total agreement with them.
For, while I agree that mutiny is a serious offence, to a
military man one of the most serious, I also believe that
the actions of the mutineers, while not in any way ex-
cusable, were certainly to some extent understandable,
especially if liquor had been involved, a point on which
the records are silent. To be charged with mutiny was
bad enough; to be charged with a hanging offence as a
result of a basically momentary lapse would have been
dreadful and far worse than the men deserved. I am not
a “Pom lover” by any extent of the imagination, but,
even at this remove of history, I cannot help but ap-
plaud the humanity and generosity of the senior offic-
ers involved in the incident.

Conclusion

The “HMAS Australia Mutiny” happened over 75 years
ago. At this remove of history and given the fact that
the affair was totally non-violent and bloodless, it is
difficult for a person giving the incident a cursory glance
not to dismiss it as the “trivial matter” which the Fed-
eral Opposition of the day referred to it as. It is also
difficult for a non-military person not to decry the sen-
tences passed on the five court-martialed mutineers as
overly severe. Finally, it is very easy at this remove of
history to view the incident in an “us-against-them” or
“Poms versus Aussies” light.

Having examined both the incident and the legal frame-
work in which it occurred in some detail from the perspec-
tive of a professional soldier of many years serv-
ance, I cannot agree with any of the forgoing contentions.
The matter was not trivial, for mutiny never is a trivial
matter; the sentences were not in my opinion severe for
the five ringleaders could easily have found themselves
on the gallows (a remote possibility I agree, but a possi-
bility nonetheless); and I do not agree that the matter
was an example of Australian bushing by the RN, ex-
cept possibly in so far as the senior RN officers of the
RAN were committed to ensuring that the high stand-
ards of discipline and conduct of the RN were devel-
oped and sustained in the very young RAN.

In conclusion, the HMAS Australia Mutiny was a very
important event in the history of the RAN. Almost for-
gotten today, it is indicative of the painful growth of the
RAN from a fledgling colonial force to the mature pro-
fessional force it is today. It was my intention in writ-
ing this article to acquaint readers with the history of the
event and to comment on it and I hope that readers have
been both interested and informed by the result.

End Note: After some considerable effort, I was able
to obtain the names and some details of the service
careers of the five accused. I decided, after some re-
lection, not to use them in case publication might cause
embarrassment and distress to the families of the men
(a remote possibility but nevertheless a real one).
By mid-afternoon of 15 March, 1889, it was apparent to all aboard the small fleet of British, American and German warships crammed into Apia harbour at Samoa that a major blow was in the offing. Already the German gunboat Eber had dragged its anchor and damaged its propeller when it touched ground during an earlier blow and the crews of the various ships began to secure for what they knew was going to be a severe storm.

Among the international flotilla making preparations was the cruiser HMS Calliope, a unit of the Royal Navy’s Australia Station, normally based in Sydney. The question arises of course as to what a ship of the Royal Navy was doing in the primitive harbour of a distant South Pacific island in company with ships of the United States and Germany. The aim of this article is to describe the background to Calliope’s presence and to detail her adventures during the great hurricane.

Towards the end of the 19th century, both Germany and the United States were expanding into the Pacific, vying with the traditional powers of France and Great Britain. While most of the island kingdoms had been well and truly staked out by the colonial powers by the second last decade of the century, Tonga and Samoa still remained unclaimed. Although a number of moves had been made to annex Tonga by various powers, the existence of a strong central government embodied in the person of King George Taupo, the latter of whom had emerged triumphant. The situation presented by this constant warfare as the ruling families battled for control of the position greatly coveted by the main ruling families.

This system resulted in almost constant warfare as the ruling families battled for control of the position of tafa‘ifa. The situation presented by this constant state of civil war was totally inimical to the designs of the European powers, driven as they were by the triple imperatives of commerce, Christianity and coaling stations. The Europeans, in their pursuit of empire, both commercial and political, needed and desired a strong central government with whom they could treat to ensure the security and safety of their traders and missionaries and which would assure them of access to coaling stations for their cruising squadrons.

By early 1889, the United States and Germany were at loggerheads over control of Samoa, both keen to acquire the rich copra plantations of the islands as well as secure for themselves a strategically located naval base. The Royal Navy, in the form of the Australia Station, had been most reluctant to involve itself in the confused situation in Samoa but had nevertheless, by force of circumstance, become involved over the years, notably in 1875 with the embarrassing intervention of the captain of HMS Barracouta in local affairs, then in 1880 during the Malietoa Affair and again in 1885 as a result of German meddling in the local political scene.

In 1889 the Germans had engineered a bloody civil war between the (pro-German) Tamasese and the Mata‘afa, the latter of whom had emerged triumphant. Stung by the loss by their proteges to the Mata‘afa and determined to redress the balance in their favour, the Germans despatched a squadron of three ships to Apia. This move was countered by the Americans who also sent three ships. While a conference was convened in Berlin to discuss the future of the Samoans, none of whom of course were invited, the German and American ships crammed into the harbour at Apia, maintaining an uneasy truce as their national representatives vied for control ashore. At the orders of the Foreign Office in London, the Commander in Chief of the Australia Station despatched a ship to Apia to observe proceedings and to represent British interests. Admiral Tryon originally sent the frigate Lizard but later replaced her with the cruiser Calliope.

**HMS Calliope**

The ship sent to replace Lizard was the almost brand new iron and steel sheathed cruiser HMS Calliope. Launched at Portsmouth in 1884, Calliope had a length of 235 ft, a beam of 44 ft 6 in and drew just under 20 ft. With a displacement of 2770 tons, she was rated at 4020 HP and 14.6 knots from her single screw, carried an armament of four 6-in and 12 5-in guns as well as nine machine guns, and had a complement of 291. In common with most other steam powered ships of the time, she was also rigged for sail. At the time...
The Great Hurricane

Arriving at Apia, Calliope joined the other ships crowding Apia harbour. The Americans were represented by the cruiser Trenton, the corvette Vandalia and the sloop Nipsic, while the German ships present were the corvette Olga and the gunboats Adler and Eber. Besides the seven warships crammed into the harbour, there were eight merchant vessels of various sizes also at anchor.

Even in the best of conditions Apia harbour was not a sailor's dream. At the time of the hurricane, its passage and anchorage were narrow and it was ringed by shelves and jutting teeth of coral. Captain Kane of Calliope estimated that the anchorage was sufficient for four ships. Yet on 15 March 1889, there were seven warships and eight merchant ships crammed into an anchorage which had been described as 'a known death trap in a heavy northern blow'.

Throughout the day on 15 March, the weather had been worsening. At about 1400 the barometer plunged to 29.11" and the wind picked up. The local European residents were fairly complacent, advising the ship's captains that the hurricane season was over and they would not allow his ship to ride to the length of her cables due to the closeness of the reefs astern, while to run ahead would mean running down Vandalia and to remain where he was would risk another, possibly fatal, collision with Olga. It was, Captain Kane noted later with amazing understatement, 'the most ticklish position I was ever in'.

That evening he ordered Staff Engineer Bourke to get up steam. His intention was to steam at anchor and ride out the storm in the harbour. This, however, was not to be.

Throughout the afternoon and into the night the wind continued to freshen from the north-east and by midnight was blowing a gale. The Vaisigano River which empties into Apia harbour quickly changed from a harmless trickle into a roaring torrent and swept into the harbour scouring all of the sand and mud out of the basin. With nothing for the kedge anchors to grab onto, they dragged helplessly across the harbour floor and the ships in the harbour careened wildly about the anchorage, crashing into each other.

At about 0800 on 16 March, the first ship, Eber, went down. Her damaged propeller rendered her attempts to steam into the wind ineffective and when her anchor cables finally gave way she was picked up by the towering seas and slammed stern first into a reef after which she went down stern first, taking with her her captain, Kapitan-Leutnant Wallis, and 72 of her crew. Prior to this, the American sloop Nipsic had lost her funnel in a collision with the German corvette Olga. Despite desperate efforts to maintain steam using barrels of pork as fuel, without a funnel this was impossible and Nipsic was eventually driven onto the beach. To the shame of the US Navy, most of the crew of the Nipsic, rather than attempting to go to the assistance of their fellow seamen, wandered off to various grog shops and taverns along the waterfront and proceeded to get drunk.

The other German gunboat Adler had also collided with Olga and had lost her bowsprit and now found her stern dangerously close to the reef. The American cruiser Trenton, which apparently suffered severe design faults and had been in danger of foundering all night, despite the efforts of 200 of her crew manning the pumps, had now lost her rudder and was blocking Adler's way to the open sea. Unwilling to suffer the fate of the Eber, Kapitan-Leutnant Fritz ordered his moorings slipped and allowed his ship to broach to and be driven up onto the reef. The concussion of slamming into the reef broke the gunboat's back but she settled securely on the reef and in the end only 20 of her crew were lost.

At 0845 Calliope collided with the American corvette Vandalia, carrying away the American's quarter gallery. A moment later she narrowly avoided being rammed by Olga. Captain Kane realised that he could not allow his ship to ride to the length of her cables due to the closeness of the reefs astern, while to run ahead would mean running down Vandalia and to remain where he was would risk another, possibly fatal, collision with Olga. It was, Captain Kane noted later with amazing understatement, 'the most ticklish position I was ever in'.

Faced with almost certain destruction if he remained at anchor, Kane was determined to escape from the harbour into the relative safety of the open sea. At his order the Engineering Department worked the engine 'red hot' then he slipped his cables and snaked past Vandalia. Unfortunately, the by now flooded, rudderless and engineless Trenton still blocked the passage, only a perilously narrow gap between wreck and reef. The order to slip had been given at about 0930 and Kane later recorded that it was 'an anxious moment, for some time she remained perfectly still, moving neither way, and then gradually drew ahead, pitching tremendously, bow and stern in turns under water'. When Captain Kane gave the order to slip the anchor, Calliope's stern was a mere twenty feet from the reefs.
With her engines straining to produce every available pound of steam, Calliope struggled to escape the storm lashed harbour, her heaving boilers barely managing to move her forward at one knot in the teeth of the hurricane. With steerage way barely on, Kane at first doubted his ability to alter course to avoid the sinking Trenton but at the very last moment managed to pass under her stern in a feat of seamanship which excited the admiration of all who watched it. As Calliope inched past Trenton, the crew of the stricken American cruiser, in one of those acts of inspired madness which moments of extreme peril sometimes evoke, paused in their desperate labours to loudly cheer the British cruiser, a passionate salute to the skill and daring of one ship and crew from the crew of another ship who doubtless believed themselves to be doomed.

Clawing painfully past Trenton, the British cruiser slowly left the American behind as she steered for the harbour mouth by compass, the driving spray and mist obscuring the harbour mouth. She eventually reached the open sea but was not to know this until next day. During the long painful haul out of the harbour in the face of the storm, it had taken Calliope over two hours to steam a distance of four cables (about 730 meters). 'Once outside', wrote Kane afterwards, 'it was nothing but hard steaming; if the engines held out we were safe, if anything went wrong with them we were done for'. Calliope remained under full power from 0930 until about 2000 that night, the ship just making steering way through a haze which reduced visibility to a few feet and completely obscuring the harbour mouth. She eventually reached the open sea but was not to know this until next day.

Meanwhile, back in the harbour all was chaos. Giving up the struggle against the storm, Captain Schoonmaker of the USS Vandalia attempted to run his ship onto the beach near the deserted Nipsic but at the last moment a huge wave caught the ship's stern and drove it onto the reef. Her head swung to starboard and she immediately began to fill and settle. As his ship began to go down, Captain Schoonmaker was swept overboard and lost. Some reports say he collapsed from exhaustion, others that he was killed by a deck gun which had broken free. Either way, his body was not recovered until some days later over nine kilometres down the coast.

By 1500, only Trenton and Olga were still afloat, the German ship repeatedly dodging the floundering American. Shortly after, Trenton's cable finally parted and the ship was driven stern first into the inner basin. At 1600 Olga, out of control, smashed into Trenton's quarters, first port, then starboard. In a last despairing attempt to save his ship, Kapitan zur See von Ehrhardt managed to beach Olga, miraculously without losing a single life, although one American seaman had been killed on Trenton when Olga had smashed in one of her gun ports.

Trenton continued her rudderless voyage to the shore and lurched into the sunken Vandalia. As she struck fast, lines were thrown across from Trenton to the survivors clinging to Vandalia's rigging and they were dragged to (comparative) safety aboard the cruiser. In total, 43 members of Vandalia's crew, including the captain, were lost.

The force of the waning storm kept Calliope at sea until the morning of 19 March when she ventured back to Apia to try to recover her lost anchor. A scene of total desolation greeted her. Adler was high and dry. Olga and Nipsic beached and Trenton partly piled on the sunken Vandalia and herself partially sunk to the gun deck. Of Eber there was no site at all. All merchant vessels were also sunk and the beach was strewn with debris. Unable to recover his anchor and in need of repairs which were unavailable in Apia, Kane decided to steam for Sydney. This decision was supported by the British consul who agreed that political matters were, for the moment, overshadowed.

Rescue efforts for the stricken ships had begun on the morning of 17 March even as the hurricane still raged. This rescue effort came from a totally unexpected quarter. Prior to the advent of the hurricane, the Samoan rebel leader Mata’afa had massed 6,000 men outside Apia preparatory to attacking the Germans. On hearing of O le Afa, the big hurricane, however, the rebels had thrown aside their weapons and streamed into Apia to offer their assistance. The first thing that they did was to assist the survivors of the Nipsic ashore. A party then tried to reach Adler stranded on its reef but were driven back by a group of fifty armed Germans who had been on the beach as a security party before the storm struck.

Somewhat understandably, the Germans thought that the Samoans were intent on finishing off the survivors of the Adler rather than rescuing them.

Later in the morning a party of Samoans did in fact manage to reach Adler and brought a safety line back to the beach but it broke. Numerous valiant efforts to replace the line by Samoans trying to swim out to the reef were defeated. Finally, the Chief of Apia commandeered a whale boat and with a crew of Samoans ventured out to rescue the sailors who had been clinging to Adler's rigging since 0800 the previous morning. They then rigged safety lines to the beach and for the rest of the day ferried survivors ashore. During these operations the only Samoan to die in the harbour, a man named Tui, was killed when a gun broke loose on Adler's deck and crushed him. In the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of Treasure...
Island, who was then resident in Samoa and was an eye witness to the events described, by their selfless effort 'the Samoans earned the gratitude of friend and foe.'

Afterward

Several months after the storm Olga and Nipsic were refloated, the German ship going to Sydney for repairs while the American went to Honolulu. Eber was gone completely, her wreck sucked out though the throat of the reef into the deep water outside. Trenton, Vandalia and Adler were stripped by wreckers and the hulks of the first two were eventually removed. Adler however, remained on her reef for over sixty years. In 1956 she was covered up by landfill during a project to expand Apia's land area out over the reef. Local legend has it that this burial unleashed the hurricane of 1966, when the shrieks of the sailors stranded on Adler during the 1889 hurricane were supposedly heard in the wind.

Besides the warships, all of the merchant vessels in the harbour were also sunk or destroyed. A memorial to the German sailors who died is located on the coast road half way between Apia and Mulinuu Point.

Captain Kane and his ship were a source of immense pride in both London and the Australian colonies, especially New South Wales, home of the Australia Station. Kane's report of proceedings was presented in London as a parliamentary paper. In the report Kane gave special praise to the conduct of the Engineering Department of Calliope and in particular to the work of Staff Engineer Bourke. This praise was seconded by the First Naval Lord, Sir Richard Vesey Hamilton and the Commander-in-Chief of the Australia Station, Rear-Admiral Fairfax. For his efforts Bourke was immediately promoted to Fleet Engineer.

The disaster drew attention to the great risks Royal Navy ships ran when carrying out requests to remain at Samoa and other islands in the South-West Pacific during the hurricane season. The experience at Apia led to the Admiralty advising that such risks would only be sanctioned in the future if the Foreign Office was prepared to take responsibility for any losses that were incurred.

Calliope left the Australia Station at the end of 1889 returning to English waters. She remained on the strength of the Royal Navy for another twenty years, being finally sold out of the service in 1909 or 1910. Her steering wheel was presented to the government of Western Samoa in 1953 but now resides in a museum in New Zealand.

Conclusion

The fate of Samoa and its eventual history under the various rulerships of Germany, America, Britain and New Zealand is beyond the scope of this article. The aim of the article was to recount the story of O le Afa, the great hurricane of 1889 and to particularly detail the skill and gallantry of the captain and crew of Calliope, a ship firmly connected with the early naval development of Australia.

The hurricane itself was a tremendous disaster. Four warships were totally lost while 144 of their crewmen died. The death of the Samoan Tui brought this to 145 while two merchant seamen were also killed, bringing the grand total to 147. On the other hand, the hurricane did succeed, at least for a time, in defusing an extremely tense diplomatic and military situation, one which according to some commentators could actually have led to war. Had the colonial powers not been so concerned with squabbling over an 'unclaimed' portion of the South Pacific, it is probable that the warships would not have been in the harbour at Apia on that fateful day. Of all the players in the drama, the only ones to come out of it with any credit were Calliope and her crew and, most especially, the Samoans who cast aside their enmity and anger to go to the rescue of their enemies in their hour of distress. In the end though, as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, 'not the whole Samoan Archipelago was worth the loss in men and costly ships.'

About the Author

Graham Wilson, the son of a retired RAN officer, was born in 1953 and enlisted in the ARA in 1971 after a short period of service in the CMF. Originally an infantryman, he served in Australia and overseas with the 5th and 5th/7th Battalions, the Royal Australian Regiment and as an instructor at the Infantry Centre. Corps transferring to the Australian Intelligence Corps in 1979, he has served in various intelligence positions in Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane and Port Moresby. Awarded warrant rank in 1984, he is currently serving with the Directorate of Security - Army in Canberra. Graham is married with three children and combines a life long passion for military history and militaria with a love of writing.